

Obituary: Ellen Meiksins Wood

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Ellen Meiksins Wood, political theorist, born 12 April 1942; died 14 January 2016.

The political theorist Ellen Meiksins Wood, who has died aged 73, held that in its deepest sense, democracy means “nothing more nor less than people’s power, or even the power of the common people or the poor”. The socialist left is thus the true heir to the tradition of popular democracy.

In the book with which she made her first significant mark, *The Retreat from Class* (1986), she argued that, without an organic connection to the needs and aspirations of working people, socialism becomes rudderless, a dream without an agent that might realise it. In tandem with the American historian Robert Brenner, she developed an account, most fully expressed in *The Origin of Capitalism* (1999), that rejected the standard view of the rise of capitalism as the product of expanding markets and trade.

Critical instead were processes in the countryside such as the enclosure movement in early-modern Britain, roughly from 1450 to 1800, which displaced people from the land. Rather than conferring freedom, the rise of capitalism actually created a new form of bondage, which she called “market dependence”. Having deprived them of land, emerging capitalism forced poor people on to the labour market, offering them no choice but to sell their ability to work if they hoped to survive.

Democracy Against Capitalism (1995) dissected the conflict between capitalism and democracy. Ellen showed that by legally relegating issues of property, ownership and work to the private sector, capitalism confines public power to electoral politics. In so doing, it empties democracy of its original meaning as the power of the common people, leaving workers precariously exposed to market forces. In order to counter this, she advised that we need to reimagine democracy as containing freedom from the dictates of the market. This would require democratic control by those who produce the wealth over the conditions of its production and distribution.

In her writings on political theory, Ellen demonstrated how thinkers such as Plato or John Locke should not be seen as private geniuses contemplating timeless questions. She portrayed them as historical figures, grappling with the conflicts over property, power and justice that defined their societies.

Her approach was dubbed “political Marxism” by the French historian Guy Bois, and it was true that Ellen gave a greater emphasis to social and political conflicts than many Marxist historians did. She had reservations about the term: she accepted that political economy and economic developments mattered, but merely argued that on their own they did not explain great historical changes, and that political events deserved greater emphasis.

True to her roots as the child of Jewish socialist refugees from Latvia, Ellen proudly positioned herself on the side of the poor and the oppressed, celebrating those who have fought for a more democratic and egalitarian society. Born in New York, she was the daughter of Gregory Meiksins, an interpreter, and of his wife, the former Mischa Berg, a refugee settlement worker. The family moved to the west coast, where Ellen went to Beverly Hills high school and received a bachelor’s degree in

Slavic languages from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1962, and a PhD in political science from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1970.

She moved to Canada in 1967, where she took up a position at York University, Toronto, and the following year married the political theorist Neal Wood. There she influenced scores of students, myself among them, and she became a Canadian citizen. When she retired in 1996, Ellen was inducted into the Royal Society of Canada.

From 1984 to 1993 she served as an editor of the *New Left Review*, based in London, where she lived for several years, and she also co-edited the New York-based journal *Monthly Review* (1997-2000).

Neal died in 2003. After five years together, in 2014 Ellen married Ed Broadbent, a former leader of the New Democratic party. Ellen is survived by Ed and her brothers, Robert and Peter.

David McNally

P.S.

*<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/10/ellen-meiksins-wood-obituary>